



Journal of Educational Controversy

Volume 4
Number 1 *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty:
Rethinking Poverty and Education*

Article 15

2009

How Chet Bowers' Writings Contribute to A/Moral Vulnerability for EcoJustice

Michael P. Mueller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mueller, Michael P. (2009) "How Chet Bowers' Writings Contribute to A/Moral Vulnerability for EcoJustice," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol4/iss1/15>

This Rejoinder is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

REJOINDER

How Chet Bowers' Writings Contribute to A/Moral Vulnerability for EcoJustice

Michael P. Mueller
University of Georgia

Chet—thank you for responding to my rejoinder. Since you bring it up and lest we leave readers in the dark about the main theme of the conference paper you are referring to (presented in Windsor, Canada at the 2008[a] Provoking Research ProVoking Communities Conference), I provide a brief referent. The main theme of that paper was to discuss why setting up a scarecrow argument around E.O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, and Carl Sagan as spokesmen for science creates an easy target for those who want to scrutinize science for its shortcomings based on these scientists. For those who are unaware, a *scarecrow* is another word for *straw man argument*, where the theorist sets up a misrepresentation of say, science, or quotes a person's words out of context, or presents a scholar's work unfairly—all to refute a position and make it look like anyone who holds the position has been defeated. While Bowers is right in critiquing these scientists for the ways in which they misrepresent the sciences, they do not speak for science and are not taken seriously by many knowledgeable educators worldwide. Science, itself, cannot be critiqued on this basis, however. Doing so is ethically irresponsible to the sciences (for more, see Mueller, 2009a/b, Mueller & Bentley, 2009; Mueller & Tippins, 2009; Tippins et al., 2010). Moreover, the paper mentioned addresses how Bowers deemphasizes or ignores the *socioscientific* trends rapidly emerging in science and environmental education, which specifically focus on ecojustice concerns. But it is very difficult to know what is going on inside schools if one spends very little time in the classroom, which is an assumption based on the silences of the *particular*, inadvertently perpetuated in Bowers' work. Nonetheless, it does not seem ethical to discuss a person's working ideas presented at a conference only to use the nonexistent description of these ideas as a way to make a position look like it has been defeated, so that those who side with the more relational approach to ecojustice that I argue will also appear defeated.

But I am glad, Chet, that you bring out this topic for our discussion because it relates to my rejoinder, that is, there is an overreliance of environmental theorists to use a scarecrow science to prove “ecological crisis” (Mueller, 2009b). This shock doctrine type move is very Eurocentric and anthropocentric. It is a logical tendency to resort to what one knows will wake up educators or rattle scientists, as Thomas Kuhn (1962) philosophized. However, the shock doctrine of ecological crisis is very seldom, if ever, used in scientific documents and I have never been approached by my Native American students with the fallacy of crisis proved by science to promote change. The verbal theater of crisis is not externally coherent for the vast majority of science teachers with whom I work, and the logical leap to crisis talk is being made without the specifics of which scientists are saying it and of which ecosystems are being degraded (keeping in mind that science is the way that humans decipher whether an ecosystem is degraded, without other species' inputs). Withstanding the history and philosophy of science, crisis talk is used to create paradigm shifts in science and was never intended to be used outside of the sciences as a scarecrow to reduce our consumerism, *per se*. Besides, has this scarecrow really worked? If not, then it is definitely a weak spot for ecojustice educators. The shock doctrine is also anthropocentric in that it reduces ecology to cultural concerns and subsequent concerns for a crisis in the fact that the central focus is degraded environments that support *human* beings. Basically, if humankind were not affected by degraded ecology, then why would it really matter morally? There is a significant a/moral vulnerability for the consequentialist philosophy of crisis talk, because without a crisis narrative, I doubt Bowers' writings would get people up off their sofas and into the forest. Despite that, I started to look for ways that ecojustice could be grounded by authentic ethical philosophy. In “Educational Reflections” (Mueller, 2009b), I discuss the promise of *biocentric pluralism* for ecojustice, which is one way that ecojustice scholars can move beyond the consequences of crisis talk, fear, and shock.

Crisis talk is like when people say that they need to scream and swear in order to get others' attention, when in fact this strategy rarely works in the classroom and does little to promote more sustainable ideas. Moral frameworks should not be based on screaming and swearing, fear, shock, or the end all of humanity. They can be premised on what comprises humanity—love, trust, generosity, sharing, and so forth. Can this be done with the particular elaboration of how children are being raised or how teachers are being prepared? There is a/moral vulnerability for those who write as if their ideas are premised everywhere and nowhere.

Chet, I am still waiting for the “moral framework” promised in the title of your original essay (2009), albeit I do not disagree that moral frameworks are much needed now. There are two limitations of the original work:

1. Ecojustice theory is morally vulnerable when scholars depend on science to prove ecological crisis or the ethical imperative to wake up educators or drive others to action such as environmentalism (or refocus their selective [moral] attention from social justice priorities to ecojustice perspectives).

2. Ecojustice theory is a/morally vulnerable when scholars rely on scarecrows and wide sweeping generalizations about the sciences (including ecology) to promote the greening of today's youth, who are now being indoctrinated into anything green without much thought about its influences (e.g., greenwashing is a term that I have used to address corporate deception and fraudulent advertising practices).

It is not what was written in your earlier essay, Chet, that contributes to these unrecognized vulnerabilities as much as it is what you do not say—what you remain silent on. Does one need to become awakened to address the silences in how (ecojustice) educational reformers understand social justice issues? If so, then one can find the ecojustice crisis identified in my prior work (Mueller, 2009b), cited within the rejoinder.

A significant point that needs to be clarified further is that you read between the lines and assume a personal attack, when you know that most of my work has been in support of ecojustice (Mueller, 2008b). You take for granted “an attack on people outside the sciences” despite that much of my work is written to further vivify ecojustice theory for science educators and scientists, as you have said before (Bowers, 2008). Perhaps, it is because your work has been largely preoccupied with the constant critique rather than elaboration and modification of ideas theorized by scholars such as David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, Maxine Greene, Paulo Freire, Richard Dawkins, and E.O. Wilson, to name a few. By so quickly dismissing these scholars' major contributions to (educational) theory, what did you think would happen to those who take their ideas seriously enough to elaborate, critique, and modify them? The way that you represent ecojustice theory seems to infer a moral neglect of the importance of others' ideas, which serves as another way that your writing contributes to the a/moral vulnerability for ecojustice.

Moral frameworks for ecojustice embrace and value participatory democracy and the ways in which many scholars, teachers, neighbors, scientists, parents, preachers, and so on, can have a voice in the reform. Deborah Tippins, Michiel van Eijck, Jennifer Adams and I recognized the importance of bringing together a community of people to discuss ecojustice, place-based (science) education and indigenous knowledge, in a way that acknowledges the significance of having multiple voices, humility, and developing confluence. The book is *Cultural Studies and Environmentalism: The Confluence of EcoJustice, Place-Based (Science) Education and Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (Tippins et al., 2010), with a forward by Paige Jackins and David Sobel. This book embodies a more relational approach for ecojustice through the confluence of dissident ideas and uplifting narratives of hope, love, and a vision of what would take hold in science and science education if we were open to the voices of diverse people and those who advocate for others (Tippins & Mueller, 2009). What I am pointing to instead is a better way to democratize ecojustice.

Coda

I am still very interested in how you would answer the question of whether you privilege human survival and reproduction writ large within the shock doctrine of ecological crisis. I am also interested in what role that ecology (science) should play within my own teachers' understandings of culture and their ecologies. Understanding that culture is a very important part of this ecological conversation, how should teachers be prepared to deal with the teach-to-the-test mentality and moral obligation to prepare youth for success? Are there any social justice conditions that should not take a back seat to ecojustice in the shorter term? These things will need to be answered in the particular, I believe, if we are to influence particular behaviors. We may find that these answers are too complicated to be addressed by a single moral (justice) framework.

References

Bowers, C.A. (2008). More than being green. A response to Mike Mueller's review of Transforming environmental education: Making the cultural and environmental commons the focus of educational reform. *Educational Studies*, 44(3), 301-306.

Bowers, C. A. (2009). [Rethinking Social Justice Issues Within an Eco-Justice Conceptual and Moral Framework](http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal/). *Journal of Educational controversy*, 4(1). <http://www.wce.wvu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal/>

Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mueller, M.P. (2008a, July). *The moral and ethical consequences of engaging youth in scientific inquiry: Implications for strengthening communities through ecojustice and science education*. Paper presented at the 2008 Provoking Research ProVoking Communities Conference, Windsor, ON, Canada. Mueller, M.P. (2008b). Ecojustice as ecological literacy is much more than being “green!” *Educational Studies*, 44(2), 155-166.

Mueller, M.P. (2009a). On ecological reflections: The tensions of cultivating ecojustice and youth environmentalism. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 4(4), 999-1012.

Mueller, M.P. (2009b). Educational reflections on the “ecological crisis”: Ecojustice, environmentalism, and sustainability. *Science & Education*, 18(8), 1031-1056

Mueller, M.P., & Bentley, M.L. (2009). Environmental and science education in “developing nations”: A Ghanaian approach to renewing and revitalizing the local community and ecosystems. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 40(4), 53-63.

Mueller, M.P., & Tippins, D.J. (2009). van Eijck and Roth’s utilitarian science education: why the recalibration of science and traditional ecological knowledge invokes multiple perspectives to protect science education from being exclusive. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, DOI: 10.1007/s11422-009-9236-z

Tippins, D.J., & Mueller, M.P. (2009). As if local people and places mattered: A relational, ecological pragmatist framework to guide projects of rural science education. In W.M. Roth & K. Tobin (Eds.), *The world of science education: Handbook of research in North America* (pp. 529-542). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: SensePublishers.

Tippins, D.J., Mueller, M.P., van Eijck, M., & Adams, J.D. (Eds.). (2010, in press). *Cultural studies and environmentalism: The confluence of ecojustice, place-based (science) education, and indigenous knowledge systems*. New York: Springer.